

nick flynn/philip gourevitch/mary karr exchange

regarding "standard operating procedure" (sop)

on talking points memo (tpm)

23-27 june 2008

gourevitch's first post 23 june (pasted at end), then:

23 june 2008

mary karr's first post (excerpt):

. . . That said, I wasn't even slightly surprised when some of the worst scenes--a man seemingly smeared in his own shit in the rain, or hung upside down by his heels from his bunk--were debunked completely. Gourevitch told the tale of the prisoner nicknamed Shitboy--a wholly unmanageable psychotic who'd eat his own excrement, smear himself with it, throw it at people. Shitboy hung himself upside down from his bunk by the ankles. Taken outside so the rain could clean him off, he rolled in mud. He thus appropriated the prevailing means of humiliation and used them to humiliate his captors, the way young black men have tried to do with the n-word. He came to resemble that other deranged prisoner, Gus, the one on the end of Lynndie England's leash, who was--in Gourevitch's fine interpretation-- "the freest man in Abu Ghraib."

But why--people ask--take a picture of it?

As someone who's gone through traumatic things and not been believed or understood, I find the picture-taking makes crazy sense. If--as my mother shot at my stepfather or my daddy--I'd had a camera! Even in adulthood, my sister and I maintained a fetishistic attachment to the bullet holes in our childhood kitchen. Age forty, we showed them to our suitors as part of the house tour. Long after we'd fixed the kitchen up, we waited to retile. In an untenable situation, you take a picture partly because you don't believe you were there. You take it because you know you'll never again be who you were then, and you know it's gonna be hard to grasp if you survive it.

The girl who would become "leash girl" was trained by her domineering boyfriend to grin at a camera with a thumbs up sign. This was a sweet country girl who joined up at seventeen with enormous pride. Living in the prison's fowl conditions, she'd probably started to do lots of things automatically. *Smile*, the beau would say, and she'd make thumbs up. Over and over and over. So they're dragging a recalcitrant-to-the-point-of-being-dead-weight prisoner (aka Gus) to interrogation, and the strap they fit over his shoulders slips because he's lifted his hands over his head like a diver, and part of it is around his neck, and the beau says Smile . . .

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23 june 2008

nick flynn responds to karr:

dear mary karr, my friend,

I'm glad that yr voice is part of this discussion, but I feel a need to point out something that was inexplicably left out of SOP, both the film and the book, specifically any Iraqi voices, especially those who were depicted in the infamous photographs. I met with several last year, including the one nicknamed "Gus," and as soon as I can get a message to him I will ask what he thinks of being referred to as "the freest man in Abu Ghraib." And for the record, I found him anything but "deranged."

If you would like to read his version of the events of the night he was photographed on the end of Lynndie England's leash, The Physicians for Human Rights have just released a report called "Broken Laws, Broken Lives," and his transcript can be found at <http://brokenlives.info/>. PHR does not use the MP's nicknames for the detainees ("Gus" or "Shitboy"), but instead gives them respectful Arabic pseudonyms (Amir is the man on the leash).

I am going to write to Mr Gourevitch now and ask what he was thinking when he chose to report only the MP's versions of the nights the photographs were taken, especially in a book that is otherwise an

important addition to our understanding of how we ended up in Abu Ghraib and beyond.

nick flynn

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23 june 08

nick flynn writes to gourevitch:

Dear Philip Gourevitch

SOP is an important addition to our understanding of how we ended up in Abu Ghraib and beyond, but I feel a need to point out something that was inexplicably left out of both the film and the book--any Iraqi voices, especially those who were depicted in the infamous photographs. In a project that declared as its primary focus to understand those in the photographs, I was disappointed to be offered only the MPs versions of those nights.

I met with several of the Iraqis depicted in the photographs last year, including the one the MPs nicknamed "Gus," the man on the end of Lynndie England's leash, who I will refer to here as "Amir." In the MPs version of that night, as reported in SOP, Graner is concerned with the well-being of Amir, of how to move him without injuring him, which led to using the "tie-down strap." As I read this I assumed that Mr Gourevitch was merely allowing the MPs enough rope to hang themselves, as it were, but Gourevitch concludes with this: "Once we learn Shitboy's story, however, the pictures of him with Graner and Frederick become relatively anodyne. With Gus and the tie-down strap, the opposite is true: even when we find out the story, the pictures of him with England remain shocking—only now the shock lies in the fact that the pictures look worse, more deliberately deviant and abusive, than the reality they depict." (p148)

I understand the desire to make clear that seven low-level MPs took the fall for a policy that was formed in the White House, and accepted by and large by the American people, but I don't see what it serves to suggest that the photographs "look worse . . . than the reality they

depict."

If you would like to read Amir's version of the events of that night, The Physicians for Human Rights have just released a report called "Broken Laws, Broken Lives," and Amir's transcript can be found at <http://brokenlives.info/>. His description of that night is anything but anodyne.

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24 June 2008

mary karr responds to nick flynn:

Corrected on most counts

Nick Flynn, my friend. I didn't speak to Gus, of course, and I yield to your inside scoop and superior (this isn't sarcastic) knowledge of things political. No dookey. I'm not a big political thinker and don't pretend to be. I am introspective dweeb who wanders around her apartment reading new translations of Virgil. But I am a citizen, and I do give a big rat's ass about understanding how soldiers become solely responsible for the crimes of policy makers. And how in the future do we stop another Abu Ghraib from happening? Somehow I don't think spanking those already spanked seems useful.

Standard Operating Procedure gave me a chance to consider the humanity of people who've been whole depersonalized, people from a class not much represented by the media roasting them, while their superiors--the real perpetrators of serious war crime policies--skate walk into their big-fee speaking engagements. (I wonder what Rumsfeld gets?)

Vis a vis Gourevitch, I don't think he was writing the book you propose--a comprehensive history. He's not a historian, and I don't think he'd be good at it. Since you've talked to Gus, maybe the Iraqi view belongs in a book you can write. (Again, this is not sarcastic--this format--predicated on snipes--always sounds snarky, and I'm holding your paw and looking into your blue eyes as I suggest it would be a great book, and maybe you'd be the dude for it.) *Standard*

Operating Procedure represented one point of view--the soldiers. That was its job. Other books on the tragedy can perform other functions, but before that book, I never heard their side of the story.

Of course. What troubles me is the inability to speak in humane terms about anybody in the military without their being summarily reroasted. And it seems to give people some kind of rush that frightens me--the venom of it. The attitude of attack is not unlike what I think those prisoners at Abu Ghraib faced, and I don't understand how--in the name of some dreamed of peace and a civilization where prisoners aren't humiliated and armies maybe cease to be necessary--I fail to see how the tone helps. And I'm not talking about your considered note, but the tone of the whole conversation seems to me violent in the cause of some conversation that neither smart enough nor pious enough to participate in.

24 june 2008

nick flynn responds to karr:

dear mary,

thanks for yr response. and I'd like to say again that I'm grateful that this discussion is happening, and that yr part of it. I'd love to know what virgil would say about all this.

re: yr comment "vis a vis Gourevitch, I don't think he was writing the book you propose--a comprehensive history." as I understood it, the project of SOP was limited to those depicted in the infamous photographs ("narrow focus" is the term I've heard morris use), which is the only reason I was confused that no Iraqis voices were represented. I was in no way expecting a comprehensive history--we are all entitled to write whatever book we can--but to allow graner to claim that he was merely trying to help the man on the end of england's leash ("amir" aka as "gus"), and then to support that claim ("... when we find out the story, the pictures of him (amir) with England remain shocking—only now the shock lies in the fact that the pictures look worse, more deliberately deviant and abusive, than the reality they depict." (SOP p148), verges on being ludicrous.

I understand the desire to make clear that seven low-level MPs took the fall for a policy that was formed in the White House, and accepted by and large by the American people, but I don't see what it serves to suggest that the photographs "look worse . . . than the reality they depict."

and as for me having an "inside scoop," Amir's version of the events of the night he was photographed on the end of Lynndie England's leash is readily accessible, The Physicians for Human Rights have just released a report called "Broken Laws, Broken Lives," and his transcript can be found at <http://brokenlives.info/>.

it is only because I respect the work of morris and gourevitch (as I imagine you do), and that their words and films carry such weight, that I am trying to fill in a few gaps. it was distressing to read you retelling graner's version of the events of that night, without the counter-balance of the man on the wrong end of the leash, who, before he was arrested, was just another working class guy trying to get by.

24 june 2008

gourvitch responds to nf on karr's post:

I'll address the question of why the book is told through the eyes and voices of the Americans, not the Iraqis, in a forthcoming post, but for now let me just say I'm puzzled that you base your complaint about the absence of Iraqis on the prisoner nicknamed Gus -- since he is the prisoner who's plight I feature most prominently. He has, in fact, the last word in the book.

Regarding the infamous photograph in which he appears naked and prone at the end of Lynndie England's leash-like strap -- that picture has been nearly universally viewed as an image of sadomasochistic abuse, a record of how a young American female dragged a naked Iraqi man across the floor like a dog. All of the MPs on the scene that night, however tell a different story -- in which Graner used the strap to get Gus out of an isolation

cell, where he had been placed naked and in total darkness by other soldiers on a previous shift (a fact recorded in writing at the time in the MPs logbook). Graner then handed the strap to England, who was there as his girlfriend -- she was an administrative clerk, with no authority to be there as a guard -- and he took her picture, snap snap snap: three pictures in three seconds.

Graner does not say, and I certainly do not say, that he was just trying to help Gus. Nor is there any suggestion at any time that the outrageous and brutal treatment of Gus was anodyne. To say so is simply to make ridiculous a description of a more complex reality. It's a reality that can be hard to get one's mind around. Yet there it is: the Army's chief forensic investigator, Special Agent Brent Pack, who was in charge of examining the photos – the man whose testimony in court martials was instrumental in **putting most of the “bad apples” in jail – said that it's clear from the slack in the strap that England was not dragging Gus in the photos. The head medic at Abu Ghraib at the time made a similar claim to researchers from the New England Journal of Medicine.** And the consistency of these accounts, not only from MPs who had reason to make excuses, struck me as interesting: that in a place where violent abuse was routine and sanctioned, the photograph we think of as a photograph of torture was apparently not a moment of torture. You say you know better from Gus, but **I was not saying that Gus was being decently treated – only that the photographs can be a deficient form of information.**

As for Gus's humanity -- his story becomes quite moving even as it gets grimmer and grimmer through the fall of 2003 at the prison, which is why I give it privilege of place as the final note in the book. Gus refused to eat, and grew frailer and frailer even as the MPs force-fed him intravenously. When they learned he was not a terrorist or insurgent, as they'd been told, but a **guy who'd been arrested after a drunken fight in a bar**, some of the MPs -- whom there's no reason to disbelieve -- tried to get him released. But that was impossible in the prison, where there was no mechanism to liberate the wrongly imprisoned (another war crime, there). Gus kept up his

hunger strike, and even refused clothing at times, and his refusal struck me as a form of resistance, existential and self-annihilating perhaps, but courageous too -- an attempt to deny his captors the ability to hold him captive. They had his body, but they couldn't get his soul, and even his body he took back from them with his refusal of food. So Gus, as the MPs described him, struck me as a figure like Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, literature's first true figure of absolute dissent, who consigns himself to oblivion in order to assert his existence in the face of annihilation. Others may see him as deranged, but I present him as something much more disturbing. He kept saying, "I refuse" – and it is for this reason that I describe him as “the closest thing to a free man in Abu Ghraib.” I didn't hear of anybody else at the prison saying that.

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25 June 2008

gourevitch weighs in:

"I know I'm not part of this, but it kind of makes you feel like you are."

First, a housekeeping note: in addition to my main posts (and I know this is a long one, which I hope you'll find worth chewing over), as this Book Club unfolds, I have been weighing in fairly regularly in the comments section. So that's a heads-up for anyone interested to check out the rolling discussion after my first post, and my response to E.J. Graff's questions, and my account after Mary Karr's latest post of the prisoner nicknamed Gus, who appeared naked and prone at the end of Lynndie England's leash in the infamous photograph.

Meanwhile, Nick Flynn has left comments scolding me for "inexplicably" omitting from the book the voices of the Iraqi prisoners who appear in the Abu Ghraib photographs. "In a project that declared as its primary focus to understand those in the photographs," Flynn says, "I was disappointed to be offered only the MPs versions of those nights." The thing is - that's not the primary focus of my project. On the contrary, when I explain

my decision not to include in the book the photographs which have so dominated and, at times, distorted perceptions of the Abu Ghraib story, I write: "In attempting here to see the story afresh it became clear that much of what matters most about Abu Ghraib was never photographed. The photographs have a place in the story, but they are not the story, and it would be untruthful here to submit once again to their frame."

Similarly my decision to tell the story through American eyes and voices is quite explicit in the book. Nick Flynn may disapprove- and Mary Karr has already responded to him about that in a post of her own (which is where I, in turn, respond to his misrepresentations of my account of the prisoner known as Gus) - but I'm happy to revisit the larger issue here, because Flynn's complaints about the book that I didn't write offer a good occasion to explain how I went about the book that I did write.

I tell the Americans' story here, because the story of Abu Ghraib, like the story of the larger Iraq war, and the still larger and longer war on terror, is an American story. Here's a snippet of how I put it in the book:

The stain is ours, because **whatever else the Iraq war was about, it was always, above all, about America - about the projection of America's force and America's image into the world. Iraq was the stage, and Iraqis would suffer for that, enduring some fifty deaths for every American life lost: in this, and by every other measure of devastation, it was very much their war. But... the war was not their choice.** It was an American war because America's elected officials decided to wage it of their own initiative, "at a time of our choosing," as the president said, and it was a war about America because it was fought in the name of our freedom and the world's. What was at stake, for the war's advocates, skeptics, and opponents alike, was an American story - the story of America as a champion of law and liberty at home and abroad, a tough but righteous arbiter of the destiny of nations, intolerant only of intolerance, a scourge to rogue regimes and bandit dictators who usurp the innate craving of all humankind to aspire to her example.

To put it bluntly, the story of Abu Ghraib was not that Iraqi prisoners were being brutally abused - that was the norm in Iraq. The story was that Americans were doing the abusing - and that they were doing it as a matter of policy. Perhaps a massacre like we saw at Hadditha is inevitable in a war of this scale: rogue soldiers on a rampage, followed by a cover-up. But the scandal of Abu Ghraib is different - the scandal of prisoner abuse and torture is precisely that it was not inevitable, that it had to be licensed, encouraged, sanctioned as policy, and nobody could have known when we invaded that a combination of bewildering incompetence, amateurism and a radically malign rewriting of the rules of interrogation, would come together to create a systematic hell on the scale of Abu Ghraib.

So to hear the American soldiers who served in that hell explain themselves is of great interest, particularly when they are not denying the cruelty they inflicted. **It is also far more powerful and more convincing and more damning to hear those people who are agents of violence describe the harm they did to their victims than to hear the victims describe it.** A pure victim has no agency in his predicament; he makes no significant moral choices; he does not act, he is acted upon. That's why I never felt that the Iraqi voices were missing, as I was not trying to tell their stories - and, as I say in the book, I chose to call the prisoners by the nicknames the American soldiers gave them, because I saw no need to further the victimization and exposure of those who might well be innocent.

And the nicknames were interesting, too, because - however crudely - they actually re-humanized prisoners whom the American soldiers were officially supposed to refer to by their five-digit ID numbers. This constant ricochet between dehumanization and re-humanization is also part of the story of what happened at that prison.

Sabrina Harman, whom I wrote about in the New Yorker, expressed that ricochet powerfully in letters she wrote home from Abu Ghraib as the abuse was going on. From these letters, it is clear that it was not only the Iraqis' humanity that suffered from the interrogators' regime of abuse. The MPs, too, felt their souls slipping away as they made their wards miserable. **And it should be understood that Harman**

and the other female MPs were used by their male colleagues to point and jeer at naked Iraqi men to add to their sexual humiliation. In this way, American women were sexually abused by being made into instruments of sexual abuse. No wonder that Harman said, "We were prisoners, too," a sentiment another MP guard, Javal Davis, shared - and which finds an echo in the title of Jeffrey Goldberg's memoir of his service as a military prison guard in Israel as well.

Years ago, in Rwanda, I heard of plans to begin integrating former members of the ancien regime's genocidal army into the new post-genocide national military. In an interview, I asked the country's leader, **Paul Kagame**, if he really believed that you could just turn a soldier around like that. Sure, he said. People, he said, "can be made bad, and they can be taught to be good." It struck me as simultaneously the most cynical and the most hopeful thing you could say about human beings and power and politics and violence. The point was obvious: leadership matters, discipline matters - people will do as they are told.

Read the "counseling statement" that Captain Christopher Brinson issued to Charles Graner one day at Abu Ghraib after Graner had walked a hooded prisoner into a wall and banged him up so badly that he - Graner - had to give the captive stitches. Brinson, whose civilian job was as the legislative director and homeland security liaison for Congressman Mike Rogers, an Alabama Republican on the Armed Services Committee, wrote to his soldier: "CPL Graner you are doing a fine job... As the NCOIC of the 'MI Hold' are, you have many accolades from the MI units here and specifically from LTC Jordan. Continue to perform at this level and it will help us succeed at our overall mission." As Sergeant Javal Davis said of Graner, **"He got an attaboy!"**

Was Graner a sadist? Perhaps. But it required a much larger climate of command permission and approval for him to give expression to his dark impulses. Now Graner is serving a ten year sentence, while Brinson has never been held to account for the conduct of his troops whom he visited on most nights on the MI block at Abu Ghraib.

I was aware, as I wrote this book, that it would have to overcome considerable resistance in most readers. It asks you to extend sympathy to people whom it is much easier to think of simply as villains. Amongst the commentariat of this book club, certainly, it seems there is little eagerness to give up having the "bad apples" to despise. Decrying our soldiers at Abu Ghraib as simply "evil" allows us to assure ourselves that we know we would have behave better. But that's where we would begin lying to ourselves. We don't know how we'd behave until we're tested. Good leaders go to great lengths to insure those under their command are never put to the tests that extreme license and corrupt orders entail. But when that test comes, history shows us clearly that as many on the left will fail as on the right - there is no ideological immunity to human malleability - so there's no taking refuge in the moral superiority of saying you would never do this or do that.

That is what I admire in the posts of Mary Karr and Jeffrey Goldberg - the way they identify quite readily with the terrible dilemmas that the lowest ranking soldiers confronted at Abu Ghraib. E.J. Graff says these are the people she went to high school with in Ohio, and she too makes the imaginative leap. So I'm distressed to see them mocked for this by some commentators whose preset tones of knowing superiority strike me as dangerously smug and remote from reality. To see the MPs as instruments of great injustice and as objects of great injustice, is not to exonerate them or absolve anyone of individual responsibility - but rather to attempt to grapple with the nature of reality where untrained young men and women who volunteered to serve their country were sent to serve as prison guards at a time when their nation had decided to replace their laws with a program of abuse and torture. Writing this book, I came to see the MPs like figures from a Theodore Dreiser or Frank Norris novel - sweeping towards their social fates. To feel sympathy for them is to feel an even greater outrage about the crimes and injustices they have come to represent.

One of the lines where that happens most vividly for me in Standard Operating Procedure is spoken by an MP named **Tony Diaz, who**

was in the position one morning of having to help a CIA interrogator by hoisting the hooded body of a prisoner who was hanging by a pair of handcuffs from a window frame. At some point in his manipulations of the prisoner, Diaz realized, "This guy's not even alive." He still resisted saying that the man was dead, even though Army pathologists had classified him right away as a homicide victim. And when Diaz described lifting the prisoner's hood and seeing his battered face, he said, "I even got some blood on my uniform because he was dripping. And it kind of felt bad, because I know I'm not part of this, but it kind of makes you feel like you are."

I keep coming back and back to that line - "I know I'm not part of this, but it kind of makes you feel like you are." It seems to me to sum up the way so many of us felt when we first saw the Abu Ghraib photographs and recoiled from them: that sense of complicity and at the same time of being a bystander - the disassociation even as the stain soaks in.

E.J. Graff asked in her post if I wrote this book with the aim of sparking accountability and prosecutions of those on high. I told her I didn't. I have no such delusions about what I do. I would feel the book was working if at some point in the claustrophobic coils of its story, you surprised yourself by nodding along with Tony Diaz: "I know I'm not part of this, but it kind of makes you feel like you are."

25 June 2008

nick flynn responds to gourevitch:

Dear Philip Gourevitch,

Thank you for engaging in this conversation—as I've said, I have enormous respect for your work, and I have no objection to your focus on the MPs, but I'd like to respond to two things you wrote in response to my comments in Mary Karr's post.

You wrote: "Graner does not say, and I certainly do not say, that he was just trying to help Gus. Nor is there any suggestion at any time that the outrageous and brutal treatment of Gus was anodyne." [to

remind everyone, “Gus” (aka “Amir”) is the man in the photograph on Lynndie England’s leash]

To clarify, here are the a few of the quotes from SOP that made me feel that the MPs were describing the treatment of Gus that night as anodyne:

“ . . . he didn’t get hurt The medics, Ambuhl said, had approved the way he handled Gus under the circumstances” (p142)

“. . . England scoffed at the idea that the photograph depicted sexual humiliation. “Just because Gus is naked?” she asked. (p139)

“My concern was whatever it took to keep him from getting hurt.” (p142, medic auch)

It is of interest to hear how the MPs and medics describe that night, but the conclusion you come to seems to endorse their version— “Once we learn Shitboy’s story, however, the pictures of him with Graner and Frederick become relatively anodyne. With Gus and the tie-down strap, the opposite is true: even when we find out the story, the pictures of him with England remain shocking—only now the shock lies in the fact that the pictures look worse, more deliberately deviant and abusive, than the reality they depict” (p148).

I understand that this is one of the central theses of SOP, the way photographs make us feel we know a story when in fact we know nothing. And I agree that there were things going on at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere that were much worse than what the photos reveal, and I’m grateful for the insights you provide on those important points. But what of the leash? I’m sure it was used, at times, to protect psychotic prisoners from hurting themselves, but it is also important to note that in the fall of 2002, at Guantanamo, a prisoner named al-Qatahni had a leash tied to him, was dragged around, and was forced to perform “dog-tricks”—exactly what “Gus” claims happened to him that night, two years later. Because of this, I can more readily believe that a naked human pyramid was a product of

an MP's id than I can believe that putting a man on a leash was, for the simple fact that it was being done elsewhere. It suggests, at least, that leashing someone, like putting a hooded man on a box, was more of what is euphemistically called an "enhanced technique" than anything a few yahoos on the night shift spontaneously invented.

But I can also believe that Graner probably had some nights where he wasn't such a sadist, where he might have acted humanely toward a prisoner—I just have a hard time believing it was this night. And, for the record, I also have a hard time picturing Graner tidying up a cell for the next prisoner: "Graner had an MI prisoner who was supposed to be put in the hole . . . and he wanted to clean it up first" (p136). And this says nothing to take away his humanity—I'm not one of those who would call him a monster.

In response to my post you also wrote: "I'm puzzled that you base your complaint about the absence of Iraqis on the prisoner nicknamed Gus -- since he is the prisoner whose plight I feature most prominently. He has, in fact, the last word in the book."

The problem with this is that you actually do not feature "Gus" most prominently, you feature versions of the night he was photographed on the leash as told by those leading him around on the leash. And "Gus" does not have the last word in your book—you do. You speculate that because of his resistance, he is the closest thing there was at AG to a free man. I have just sent him an email, which may take a while to get back to me, to ask him what he thinks of that.

About that photograph you also wrote this: "England seems to answer all the questions that her absence would raise, creating a sense of direct agency—falsely, according to everyone who was there: she becomes the violator" (p149).

"According to everyone who was there"—except "Gus." As I said in an earlier post, The Physicians for Human Rights have just released a report called "Broken Laws, Broken Lives," and "Gus's" transcript of the events of that night can be found at <http://brokenlives.info/>, under the name "Amir." Back to the photographs: yes, it took 20 seconds to

take the three photographs of “Gus” on the leash, and yes, the leash is slack in England’s hand, but this says nothing of what happened next, of whether the leash was tightened after the photos were taken, or not, which, as I understand it, is one of your points about the nature of photographs. So why come to the conclusion that “the pictures look worse. . . than the reality they depict?” In the testimony I was present at, the night ends with England breaking “Gus’s” finger under her boot.

As I’ve said, one can write a book solely from the American perspective on Abu Ghraib, but I’m less convinced that one should then also speak for Iraqis, who are forced to remain silent. The thing is, I know that Errol Morris had complete access to “Gus,” as well as to any of the other ex-detainees (at least the ones still alive), as Morris was in contact with the same lawyer who introduced me to them. Yet he has said in press materials that he “couldn’t locate them.” But I don’t expect you to answer for Morris. I only bring it up because it, perhaps, points to one of the reasons that Abu Ghraib happened—that is, the ways we are able to make “the other” invisible. And this isn’t meant to sound in any way scolding, its not about me or you, it’s really about a larger crisis in our culture. I know that you, and your book, are also searching out the deeper roots of this on-going crisis, and I respect you for it.

26 June 2008

gourevitch responds to flynn:

The lines that you keep plucking from the book to suggest that I make Gus's treatment sound anodyne illustrate the way the soldiers described the scene with Gus. That doesn't mean I subscribe to their view. And, yes, of course, those soldiers are minimizing his suffering - - and I make that abundantly clear in the book. Those lines come from an account several pages long of those minutes surrounding the photographs of Lynndie holding his "leash," in which I describe Gus being held in naked in the hole -- "a solid-doored, windowless, lightless, waterless, toiletless, unfurnished, concrete isolation cell" - where he had soiled himself. I describe him emerging from that cell in

a "low-crawl" position, dragging his naked, feces-stained belly and genitals across the concrete floor, I describe him in the first photograph where his body is fully legible by saying, "He looks like a man writihing in pain," and in the next photograph, I say: "Gus's face is finally visible, and his eyes are eerie -- rolled back in his head, flashing white." And I begin this whole description by saying that Lynndie thought the whole incident was "no big deal," and I end it by quoting her dismissing the notion that there was sexual humiliation involved with these words: "Just because Gus is naked? That's standard operating procedure."

I'm sorry, but it did not seem to me that I had failed to represent Gus's treatment as appalling. I did not think I had to point out that the soldiers, in making the case that they hadn't been dragging Gus around on the leash as it appeared in the photos, were nonetheless making light of what he had gone through that the camera only hinted at but did not really show. I did not think I had to contradict and argue with every statement they made as they made it because I did not think polemic was needed to represent them accurately. It never occurred to me that I was exonerating them or belittling Gus's suffering because I wasn't. On the contrary -- I was saying that such suffering was so systemic at Abu Ghraib that the head medic thought, well, OK, if that picture represents the best we can do, so be it. Do I really need to quote the prisoner himself to say that's outrageous? I sure hope not.

Finally, it's careless to say that you can't believe Graner could have behaved cruelly and decently on the same night, or that you know he's not the kind of guy who would clean out a cell. He was a soldier. Soldiers beat up prisoners, and soldiers cleaned up afterwards. That's what they were supposed to do. Maybe he was a bad soldier, but it sure detracts from your demand for careful attention to the particulars of individual experience to say you know this guy could only have been vile. Why, as Mary asks in her most recent comment to the responses to the last post, must everybody be all one way or the other?

26 june 2008

flynn responds to gourevitch:

philip,

thanks for yr last comment on my post. this will likely be my last.

reading yr accounts in SOP of the way the MPs saw the night "gus" was photographed on the leash was insightful, and I appreciate that you collected them together. it was merely your conclusion, "that once we learn the story, the pictures look worse, more deliberately deviant, than the reality they depict," that troubled me. I am not the only one who seemed to read yr conclusion as an endorsement of the MPs claim that the night was "no big deal." (I dont want to put words in her mouth, but mary karr referred to it in her first post as a "debunking"). but it has been good to be able to ask you to clarify your position, and I appreciate the care you've taken in responding.

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a few other comments posted on tpm regarding sop:

dan k writes:

Mr. Gourevitch, you have helped me put my finger on something that has been disturbing me about the course of this entire Book Club conversation.

One can't argue with your artistic or journalistic choice to tell the American side of the Abu Ghraib story. No doubt, that is an important and interesting story to tell. But one can certainly argue with your parochial notion that the American story is *the* story of Abu Ghraib. One can argue with these sentiments:

I tell the Americans' story here, because the story of Abu Ghraib, like the story of the larger Iraq war, and the still larger and longer war on terror, is an American story.

The stain is ours, because whatever else the Iraq war was about, it was always, above all, about America - about the projection of America's force and America's image into the world.

To put it bluntly, the story of Abu Ghraib was not that Iraqi prisoners were being brutally abused - that was the norm in Iraq. The story was that Americans were doing the abusing - and that they were doing it as a matter of policy.

These assertions strike me as startlingly self-absorbed. And the self I am talking about is not *yourself*, Philip Gourevitch, but that great corporate American Self on whose behalf you propose to speak, and whose collective guilt you wish to expose and delineate.

Confession and expiation can be just as self-absorbed as the crimes that give rise to these acts of contrition. "See our stain!" you seem to say. "See the beauty of our guilt! See the redeeming eloquence of our account of our transgressions! See how willingly and magnificently we drive the nails through our own wrists and ankles! We are guilty, guilty, guilty ... and yet, we are nobly guilty, so admirably and articulately and awe-inspiringly conscious of our guilt, are we not? How could the repulsively passive and banal sufferings of our beastly victims – those film extras of life, with their annoying and inconvenient *names* and *identities* - possibly measure up to the drama of our confession and reckoning! They exist only as the necessary human props for the spectacle of our atonement. Whether we do great good or great evil, the story must remain *our* story."

And yet, we might imagine some uncooperative Iraqi writer of the future who chooses to tell the story of the prisoners of Abu Ghraib, a story in which all of the men on leashes, those heaped into pyramids or stuffed into body bags, have names and families and lives that extend before, and sometimes after, their incarcerations, and have affecting stories to be told. That writer might tell a story in which the torturers are just faceless and anonymous foreigners, mere nodes in a tedious historical line diagram extending into the past and the future, the unimportant successors of the torturers unleashed British and Saddam, and the unimportant antecedents of the torturers yet to come.

Will you then dare tell that writer that he missed the *real story*?

You say that the Iraqis were mere victims, and to dwell on them and give them names and identities is to prolong their victimization. And yet you portray Lynndie England and Sabrina Harman and Javal Davis as victims of their male comrades. And you have no problem using *their* names.

I can imagine the writers of the Gospels being upbraided by a Gourevitch of old: "You are spending far too much time on this Jesus character! He's just a victim; a passive and powerless receptacle of the action poured into him by others. You really shouldn't even use his name, since that only prolongs his ignoble victimization. Don't you realize this story is all about the Romans? It's a story about the projection of Roman power. It's about the breather of occidental form into inert oriental matter; about the presser of the imperial seal into the subjected wax. And it's an affecting story about those sad Roman centurions, forced by their remote masters on the Tiber to torture their prisoners with whips and thorns, and to pound nails into the flesh. We must tell those soldiers' stories!"

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the black commentator writes:

Aiden Delgado, an Army Reservist in the 320th Military Police Company, served in Iraq from April 1st, 2003 through April 1st, 2004. After spending six months in Nasiriyah in Southern Iraq, he spent six months helping to run the now-infamous Abu Ghraib prison outside of Baghdad.

The handsome 23-year-old mechanic was a witness to widespread, almost daily, U.S. war crimes in Iraq. His story contains new revelations about ongoing brutality at Abu Ghraib, information yet to be reported in national media.

Delgado says he observed mutilation of the dead, trophy photos of dead Iraqis, mass roundups of innocent noncombatants, positioning

of prisoners in the line of fire – all violations of the Geneva conventions. His own buddies – decent, Christian men, as he describes them – shot unarmed prisoners.

In one government class for seniors, Delgado presented graphic images, his own photos of a soldier playing with a skull, the charred remains of children, kids riddled with bullets, a soldier from his unit scooping out the brains of a prisoner. Some students were squeamish, like myself, and turned their heads. Others rubbed tears from their eyes. But at the end of the question period, many expressed appreciation for opening a subject that is almost taboo. “If you are old enough to go to war,” Delgado said, “you are old enough to know what really goes on.”

extract from the interview:DELGADO: I went to Fort Knox for basic training. It was known to be harsher than other bases. The training was mentally taxing, and there was already some anti-Arab sentiment.

Q: Like what?

DELGADO: In the early stages I remember Army chants. We sang in cadences. And the chants had anti-Arab themes. Like burning turbans, killing ragheads, killing the Taliban.

Q: What did the chants say?

DELGADO: It was three years ago. I can't tell the exact words, but the sentiment was to burn turbans and kill ragheads. That was the phraseology. Our drill sergeants would give us motivational talks to pump up our fighting spirit. The theme was the need to get revenge, to go to the Middle East to fight Arabs.

Q: All this was before you even went to Iraq?

DELGADO: Yes. My own commander was infamous for anti-Arab speeches. Before we were deployed to the Middle East, he said, “Now don't go tell the media that you're going over there to kill some ragheads and burn some turbans.” Everybody laughed, and he

laughed with them. I remember standing there in formation, having grown up in Egypt. And I was thinking: "Oh, my God, this is going to be a disaster. Our commander has this anti-Arab attitude even before we go over." The commander would give lectures about Islam. He said that Muslims advocate a holy war against us, that Islam promotes perpetual war. I've been surrounded by Muslims for a decade, exposed to their culture. He is wrong.

http://www.blackcommentator.com/133/133_think_racism_military_pf.html

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gourevitch's first post:

Opening thoughts and questions

By Philip Gourevitch - June 23, 2008, 11:17AM

A hundred years ago in Boston, the Congo Reform Association published a pamphlet by Mark Twain called "King Leopold's Soliloquy, A Defense of His Congo Rule." The text takes the form of a monologue by the Belgian monarch, as he reads through a stack of protest literature, describing crimes perpetrated by his colonial agents against his Congolese subjects: torture, abduction, enslavement, starvation, mutilation, extermination. "Blister the meddlesome missionaries!" the king fulminates. "They seem to be always around, always spying, always eye-witnessing the happenings; and everything they see they commit to paper." But, even as he rails, Leopold comforts himself with the boast that he has never come across a critic (however truthful) whom he could not discredit, stifle, or convert by the application of force or cash. Then he comes upon a pamphlet that contains photographs of mutilated Congolese, and he quakes before the evidence of this "most powerful enemy" - "the incorruptible Kodak":

The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn't bribe... the pictures get sneaked around everywhere, in spite

of all we can do to ferret them out and suppress them. Ten thousand pulpits and ten thousand presses are saying the good word for me all the time and placidly and convincingly denying the mutilations. Then that trivial little Kodak, that a child can carry in its pocket, gets up, uttering never a word, and knocks them dumb!

But even as he frets about the dangers of photography, and sees himself exposed in the grisly images of his mutilated subjects, the old Belgian discovers the true consolation of the political criminal. After all, he tells himself, the world's response to the pictures will surely be to shudder and turn away. With that thought he bucks himself up, defiant as ever. "Why certainly," he says. "That is my protection... I know the human race."

Shuddering and turning away. We did it again at Abu Ghraib.

I was covering President Bush's re-election campaign when the pictures of American soldiers tormenting their Iraqi wards in Saddam's old torture dungeons first broke in the press four years ago. The most shocking thing about the story was not that young Americans were doing such things (all of history teaches us that soldiers can easily be made to do such things, when given the license). Nor was it especially surprising to discover - as reams of official memoranda, legal opinions and military directives were leaked in the weeks and months that followed from the highest and most secretive reaches of the Bush war cabinet, the intelligence apparatus and the military command - that the outrages we saw in the Abu Ghraib pictures were expressions of a new American policy in favor of the torture and humiliation of American captives in war time. After all, the President and his men had long made clear that they regarded the Iraq War as part of the Global War on Terror, and that pretty much anything was allowed in the name of the GWOT.

No, the real shock in the Abu Ghraib story when it broke in 2004, was that there was no political price for it, no accountability for it, no public debate about whether these photographs were the way that we Americans wanted to be projecting our image and our force into the world at the start of the twenty-first century. The pictures themselves had instantly become iconic, the most witnessed images on earth since the collapse of the World Trade Towers, and it was obvious that

their infamy belonged to the entire nation - and not just to the hapless soldiers who were court-martialed and sent to the brig for taking and appearing in them. I mean, nobody was carrying those pictures in protest through the streets of Baghdad, or Jakarta, or Tehran, to demonstrate against Charles Graner or Lynndie England or Sabrina Harman or Meghan Ambuhl or Jeremy Sivits or Javal Davis or Ivan "Chip" Frederick, the seven "bad apples" whom the Administration's master framers wanted us to believe were solely responsible for the nation's dishonor.

So that dishonor was compounded by our acquiescence in it. The expose had become the cover up.

So Abu Ghraib was gnawing at me when, about a year and a half ago, the filmmaker Errol Morris, whom I've known for a long time - began sending me the transcripts of interviews he'd been filming with American service men and women who served at Abu Ghraib in the fall of 2003 when the notorious photographs were taken. The interviews spoke to me at once, and when Errol suggested that I could use them to write a book, I sat right down to it. These voices carried the full complexity of the story that I wanted to know: what it was like to be an American soldier serving in Saddam's old dungeons, holding Iraqis prisoner in the name of liberating them, serving the new American policy of total license in manhandling our captives without actually fully knowing that this policy had been put in place from on high.

From the outset I conceived of Standard Operating Procedure as a war story. I did not want S.O.P. to be a policy book, so much as a book that tells what policy looked like when it intersected with reality in the hellish theatre of the war that was Abu Ghraib.

Much of what was most wrong and most cruel about Abu Ghraib never appeared in the infamous photographs. The prison was situated in the heart of the Sunni Triangle, in the midst of a combat zone, an illegal arrangement under US Army doctrine, and a distasteful one. The prison was under constant attack: soldiers and prisoners were killed and wounded by incoming mortars. Most of the prisoners there were held without charges, having been picked up on

security sweeps by US patrols, and as their numbers leapt from a few hundred to a few thousand to nearly ten thousand through the fall of 2003, there was no system for releasing them. So, you had indefinite detention, without recourse to any system of law, in life-threatening conditions. Reasonably enough, the prisoners sometimes demonstrated, demanding better treatment - and when they did it was not uncommon for US soldiers to "control" them by firing on them with live ammunition. Children as young as ten years old were held at the prison, often as hostages - taken as bait to coax their wanted fathers or uncles or brothers to turn themselves in. This too was a war crime. And the list of these crimes goes on.

So the book, which sticks to the claustrophobic confines of Abu Ghraib's prison walls, is really very broad in its concerns, and the remarkable group of discussants that TPM has convened for this week's book club is every bit as broad in its experience and insight. For this reason, I'm really far more interested in responding to their questions, than in framing the discussion with questions of my own. But I know that's my burden here, in this kick-off post... so here are a few thoughts followed by question marks for you to chew over or ignore in favor of your better ones:

One thread of questions goes like this: What good is this story? Seriously - what do we do with the knowledge of these war crimes? What would accountability really mean? Assuming, as I'm afraid I do, that we won't be seeing any high political officials standing trial - what moral or political use is there in examining such stories?

Another thread of questions touches on our military culture. During Vietnam, the anti-war movement was the anti-draft movement. Now, almost everyone agrees - hawks and doves alike - that if we had a draft we would never have had the Iraq war, and perhaps for that reason we will never have a draft again. Instead, now, military service belongs to certain classes and regions in this country - to a large degree to certain families, as if we have moved to a caste-system, and there is now a military caste. The MPs who are at the core of Standard Operating Procedure come from Jim Webb's patch of Appalachia - and they were widely dismissed as rogue hillbilly degenerates by a political and journalistic caste that frankly assumed

superiority. Should we all be lobbying to bring back the draft to restore democracy to this country before we go trying to impose around the world?

And finally - since we are in a political election year - how readily and how easily do you think we will repair the damage done by the policies that created Abu Ghraib, if indeed there is any public desire to do so?

I'm looking forward to hearing from you -- TPM readers as well as Book Club discussants -- and to engaging in the week's discussion. Thanks for reading Standard Operating Procedure, and thanks for having me with you.